

FAQ on the Israel-Hamas Crisis

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1) Surely you don't expect Israel to continue to sit quietly and accept Hamas rockets falling on its citizens. Doesn't the Israeli government have a right to defend itself?

Not only does Israel have a right to defend itself, it has a duty to do so. There is no question that rockets fired from Gaza have created an untenable situation for the residents of southern Israel, circumstances in which no one should ever have to live.

What we have seen over the last six decades, however, is that military action doesn't necessarily make Israeli citizens any safer, and it certainly doesn't solve the problem.

The Hamas rockets must be seen in the context of the entire conflict. When Israel disengaged from Gaza in 2005, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Fatah party urged the Sharon-led government to negotiate, but were refused. No security arrangements were made, and Abbas was unable to claim the withdrawal as a victory for negotiations – so Hamas was able to claim a victory for terrorism. When Hamas won legislative elections several months later, Israel and the U.S. responded with a blockade that left Gazans significantly worse off than they had been before. Israel has retaliated for the rockets and mortars on more than one occasion, and in the summer of 2006 launched a full-scale operation in response to the capture of Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit.

Violence has only led to more violence, and neither side as been served – certainly Israel has not been made safe. The best long-term defense is not military, but diplomatic.

2) Israel has been calling for peace for years, but has never had a real partner. Why continue to believe in negotiations?

Israel has certainly called for peace, and has often engaged in negotiations. Talks led to lasting treaties with both Egypt and Jordan, and whereas each was once Israel's implacable enemy, today both are involved in efforts to mediate between Israel and her other neighbors – such as during the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

Certain opportunities for negotiations have been left unanswered, however, and while we cannot know how the region would look if they had been exploited, it's certainly possible that war could have been averted.

The Arab League has twice called for an end to all Arab-Israeli hostilities in exchange for a two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and neither Israel nor the American government has ever examined the possibility closely. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas actively sought to negotiate with Israel over the Gaza Disengagement, but the Sharon government refused. Hamas has frequently suggested a long-term, negotiated truce (*hudna*), an idea that many Israeli military and political experts have said bears investigation, but it, too, was never examined closely. Syria made repeated overtures to Israel in recent years, but the Bush Administration pointedly told Prime Minister Ehud Olmert not to engage with Damascus.

History shows that peace is never made between people who already like each other, but between people who were just yesterday at each other's throats. The only mechanism that successfully keeps the peace is negotiations that lead to mutually-acceptable agreements; military action simply further undermines the hope for such agreements to be achieved.

3) The Arab world has yet to admit that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state. Until that happens, there's really no point in talking.

Though many people feel this way, it is not an entirely accurate reading of the situation. Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel, and the Arab League has twice said that it and all its member states would normalize relations with Israel if a two-state solution is achieved between Israel and the Palestinians. Many surveys done among Palestinians in recent years demonstrate that a majority would accept a two-state resolution of the conflict in which "Palestine" is the state of the Palestinians and Israel is the state of the Jews.

Having said that, of course, many Palestinians, particularly among Hamas supporters, are unwilling to make such a statement. However, we must again look to the examples of Egypt and Jordan – neither were required to acknowledge Israel's right to exist prior to negotiation. And yet both have and maintain peace treaties with Israel today.

4) I'm afraid the Israel's effort to destroy Hamas will meet the same fate as its effort to wipe out Hizbullah in 2006 – rather than weaken the movement, Hizbullah is now stronger and has more followers, simply because it was able to stand up to Israel.

This is a very real concern. Whether or not Israel has the capacity to effectively eliminate the Hamas threat, the enormity of its military action is sure to win Israel more enemies, and enflame radicals and extremists across the Muslim and Arab worlds. This is not in Israel's interests – and, it bears noting, not in America's interests either.

Moreover, it's important to remember that every time that Israel has refused to deal with a Palestinian leader, a more extreme leader has risen to replace him. During the 1970s, Israel deported Palestinian moderates, and the PLO gained currency. As the PLO's fortunes waned in the early 1990s, and Israel agreed to deal with Yasser Arafat, Hamas was on the ascendance. A similar pattern can be seen in Israel's relations with Lebanon as well. If Hamas is destroyed, it is entirely possible that a more dangerous foe will replace it.

This is why an immediate ceasefire is crucial. Only a sustained diplomatic effort leading to a durable two-state solution has the potential to truly eliminate the threat of extremism.

5) The news reports that a clear majority of Israelis is currently in support of the war, but are there dissident voices as well?

The Meretz Party and major Israeli peace organizations including Peace Now and the Geneva Initiative have come out in support of an immediate ceasefire. Additionally, renowned Israeli authors and voices of conscience Amos Oz and David Grossman have come out in support of an immediate ceasefire.